Epilogue: The Protestant Future

Predicting the future is a fools' game which everyone plays. Of course we will not get it right, but the themes and patterns we have seen play out over five centuries of Protestant history suggest some guesses as to what might happen next. Two caveats before we begin. First: none of these guesses will be entirely correct, and some of them will be entirely wrong. Second: this is not a description of what I want to happen, but of what I think will happen whether I like it or not.

Old quarrels and new

Protestantism's formal and informal divisions are not about to heal. Protestants will not run out of things to argue about, and while some arguments will simmer down, others will become bitterer. Formal denominational structures will continue to weaken. There will be more independent, self-governing congregations, and where denominations hold together they will do so by becoming loose confederations. The reality of a democratic age is that churches are answerable to the footloose believers who fund them. Churches that try to deny this fact are swimming against the tide.

Proliferating divisions will be a source of continued grief to many Protestants. There may be good theological reasons to regret division, but it will not damage Protestantism's prospects. From the nineteenth-century United States to modern Africa, Protestantism has thrived most when it is most divided, with sects and preachers vying for converts. Stagnation or decline is much more likely when a single church dominates, as in much of Protestant Europe, or where several churches are brought together into formal or informal unions in which they avoid competing with one another, as in America's 'mainline' or the pre-1949

Church of Christ in China. Division only becomes dangerous if rivalry turns into active hostility, in which a particular denomination sees battling with its rivals as its principal calling.

Unlike for most of Protestantism's history, there will not be much effort to impose orthodoxies by force. Dominant denominations or movements will not be able to call on the power of the state to support them against their rivals, and few of them will want to try. This will extend to disputes over ethics and doctrine. Historically, many Protestants have wanted to make their own views normative for entire societies, whether through civil penalties for blasphemy or bans on alcohol or Sunday trading. Protestant political activism will certainly continue, but not in this form. Few Protestants will have the stomach for imposing their own moral disciplines onto entire societies, often even preferring to use those disciplines to differentiate themselves. Where they do campaign for coercive legislation, they will do so on secular grounds. This withdrawal from coercion will only make intra-Protestant arguments more intractable.

The main driver of continued division will be Protestantism's knack for adaptation. Protestantism will continue to fit itself promiscuously to cultures and subcultures across the globe. Nobody will like all of the results, many of which will simply entrench divisions which are already wearyingly familiar. But Protestantism's arguments never stay in the same spot for long. It is possible to make a guess at where they will go next.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a knot of issues around gender and sexual ethics have been bitterly divisive. This has been because many of Protestantism's host societies have changed their norms on these issues with astonishing speed. Protestants have had to scramble to keep up with these changes, which has been all the harder because they have not been spread evenly across the world. The resulting, highly charged debates have created the impression that contemporary Protestantism is irrevocably divided between

repressive, patriarchal dinosaurs and wild, freewheeling libertines. In fact, the gaps between the various sides are less striking than the speed with which the whole debate's centre of gravity has moved.

Since the eighteenth century, most Protestant churches, especially the most energetic of them, have been predominantly female. Women have sometimes outnumbered men by three to two or more. Until the past half-century, however, it was unusual for leaders to be drawn from the majority gender. That pattern has now largely collapsed. It is true that many Protestant churches continue, formally and informally, to restrict the central role in leading public worship to men. Given Protestants' characteristic mulish stubbornness when challenged, those restrictions will not change fast, and may for a time become points of defiant, counter-cultural pride. Despite that, Protestantism's institutional patriarchy is being hollowed out. At every other level of Protestant churches, the numbers and energy of the female majority will make itself felt. Female leadership in everything apart from formal public worship has been the norm for Pentecostalism from the beginning, and will increasingly become the norm for Protestantism as a whole. Some Protestants, men and women, will continue to worry that their religion is being feminised. This is a legitimate worry for a religion which aspires to convert men as well as women, but it also reflects sexist assumptions about men's primary importance. There is no reason to suspect that being female-dominated will harm Protestantism. It may, indeed, be an excellent adaptation to a changing world.

On sexual ethics, the gaps are also less dramatic than they appear, because Protestantism finds it difficult to defy a settled social consensus. So, for example, some Protestants have joined the Roman Catholic Church in opposing artificial contraception. To take such a stand, howver, is to incite your congregation to ignore you, or to defect to the church across the street. A powerful moral and theological argument was once made against

contraception. Nevertheless, the cause is lost in most of the world. Most Protestants have given up fighting it.

A similar transition is well under way on the one sexual issue which we might imagine would be non-negotiable for Christians. The New Testament does not record Jesus having much to say about sexual ethics, but he adamantly opposed divorce, and especially remarriage after divorce. Protestants have questioned that standard from the beginning, often allowing, for example, for separation and even actual divorce in cases of domestic violence or even simple adultery. In many contemporary societies, even this watered-down version of the traditional standard has become almost impossible to apply. Most modern Protestants find themselves holding a middle position: disapproving of or merely lamenting divorce in the abstract; accepting it as a social reality and, often, the lesser of two evils in particular cases; accepting the reality of remarriage, sometimes joyfully, sometimes grudgingly, but without demands that couples separate or that children be treated as illegitimate. For good or ill, much of the world now lives in an age of serial monogamy. Protestantism has had to get used to the fact.

Having swallowed that camel, it will not strain at some further gnats, although it may take a little time to digest them. One long-standing issue which has not gone away is polygamy. Christians have since ancient times insisted on exclusive monogamy as the only legitimate form of marriage, and have developed theological and ethical arguments for this, but the purely Biblical basis for it is pretty shaky. A couple of New Testament verses require Christian ministers to be monogamous, and the rest of the New Testament seems to assume that monogamy is normal, but the Old Testament is full of divinely approved polygamists. As we have seen, the question has periodically resurfaced through Protestantism's history. Luther burned his fingers on the issue. John Milton wrote a treatise defending polygamy, but thought better of publishing it. Mormonism became notorious for institutionalising polygamy.

The main reason polygamy has rarely been practised by Protestants is simply that it has not been common in many of Protestantism's host societies. However, in much of Africa and some other regions of the world polygamy is a well-established social reality, and the rise of Protestantism in these regions has made the question unavoidable.

It was a missionaries' dilemma for decades. In 1888, the Anglican Communion's international assembly, the Lambeth Conference, hewed as best it could to a traditionalist line: polygamists cannot be baptised unless they renounce all but one of their wives. This amounted to a demand that women be cast off and their children disowned, although it was accepted that wives themselves might be baptised while remaining in their plural marriages. The predictable result was that polygamous converts withdrew to form churches of their own, such as the United Methodist Church in Nigeria. Twentieth-century Anglicans struggled to reconcile their monogamous principles with the social realities missionaries were confronting. The official line progressively softened. The 1988 Lambeth Conference finally accepted that polygamists may be baptised, but forbade them from contracting further plural marriages after baptism.[1] Even this line will prove hard to defend. Protestant converts who do not wish to abandon polygamous social norms will find churches to endorse this, just as converts in societies where divorce and remarriage are common expect churches to work with that reality. South Africa's Nazaretha Church admits polygamists to high office and has publicly defended President Jacob Zuma's polygamy.[2] Some churches will resist this pressure. Some will succumb reluctantly to it. Others will proudly embrace it. All of them will disagree fiercely about the subject. Converts will choose what suits them best.

At present the single most explosive divide is over homosexuality. Again, the speed of change in the western democracies has been astonishing. Many countries have moved from

[1] Timothy Willem Jones, 'The Missionaries' Position: Polygamy and Divorce in the Anglican Communion, 1888-1988' in *Journal of Religious History* 35/3 (2011), 393-408.
[2] Joel Cabrita, *Text and Authority in the South African Nazaretha Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 121, 342.

criminalisation to full legal equality within half a century, with a parallel shift in cultural norms from ignorance and loathing to an almost banal acceptance. Churches have struggled to find their voice. The majority have tried to maintain their traditional condemnations, some enthusiastically, some simply wishing that these distasteful people would go away. A minority have embraced gay rights and developed theologies to fit. The course of this ongoing dispute will be determined by wider social change. Most Protestants in societies which accept gay rights will eventually – over a generation or two – find ways of coming to terms with that reality, some cheerfully, many gracelessly. Some will continue to hold out, making a virtue of being counter-cultural, hoping to suffer legal penalties which they can interpret as persecution. They will also be bolstered by links with societies around the world where gay rights have as yet gained little ground, or have faced a backlash. But the reality is that both sides of this argument are driven by society, not theology. As long as some societies accept gay rights while others find them anathema, Protestants too will be divided, in roughly the same proportions and indeed for roughly the same reasons.

This litany of social conformity may seem a little disheartening. Are Protestants doomed simply to tag along behind social shifts, finding justifications for them after the fact? Very often, yes. We have seen plenty of occasions when Protestants have embraced the beliefs their host societies needed, whether it be the God-given status of slavery in the American South or the divine summons to battle on all sides of World War I. But Protestantism is more than a vessel waiting to be filled. There are some social norms it revolts at. In contemporary disputes over sexual ethics, the issue of abortion stands out. Abortion is now socially normalised in many parts of the world, but few even of the most liberal or pro-feminist Protestants have been able to bring themselves to accept the practice. If they support legalising abortion, it tends to be on the grounds of minimising harm. The breadth of the anti-abortion consensus is particularly striking since it has such weak Biblical

foundations. It is a moral intuition, not a textual deduction. It seems unlikely either that that intuition will falter, or that the broader move towards legal abortion around the world will slow.

It is a reminder that Protestants can discover and pursue ethical principles apart from the rest of society. Sometimes they do so believing that they have history on their side, but the self-conscious Protestant attempt to get prophetically out in front of history has a mixed track record. Slave-trade abolitionism, or the anti-apartheid cause, have been vindicated by time. Alcohol prohibition, or the prophetic attempt to create 'religionless Christianity': not so much. To say nothing of some German Protestants' readiness to hitch themselves to Nazism's bandwagon. Protestants will no doubt keep on trying to embrace the future. Some of them will no doubt make promises of a 'Second Reformation', a phrase which has surfaced repeatedly through Protestant history and, like most sequels, is a reliable marker of a lack of any real ideas or energy.

The main feature of Protestant views of the future, however, will continue to be apocalypticism. One might imagine that predictions of Christ's imminent return would, by now, be salted with a recognition that it might not happen just yet – indeed, that Christianity's history may still only be getting started. But Protestants have a poor track record of thinking that way, and there is no reason to think that will change. Individuals' instinct that the place they stand is actually a crux of world history is too strong. The secular world's all-too-plausible apocalyptic anxieties, from climate change and nuclear weapons to the impact of artificial intelligence, will only lend credence to this pattern of Protestant thought. It will lead some Protestants to withdraw in despair from society, others to engage urgently with it, and a few to try to precisely predict or, worse, to precipitate the coming end.

That is a perennial theme, but what new causes will animate and divide the next generation of Protestants? My guess is that some Protestants will rediscover the spiritual

importance of food. Protestantism is highly unusual amongst world religions in making no dietary prescriptions of any kind, although many churches still frown on alcohol, and the Seventh-day Adventists go further. There are almost too many reasons for more Protestants to be drawn to dietary self-regulation. Fasting and self-denial are both perennial spiritual disciplines and potent marks of identity. In consumer societies they have a counter-cultural cachet, and where Protestants are competing with other religious groups they are ways to assert recognisable piety. Since Protestants do not like managing their piety with calendars, self-denial is less likely to mean cycles of temporary fasts than indefinite regimes of self-discipline: in particular, full or partial vegetarianism, a practice whose modern history is entwined with Protestantism's.[3] This may be justified on health grounds, as a way of honouring the bodies God gave us. It may be justified with reference to the Old Testament's dietary laws, for which some Protestants have always hankered. It may be justified on the grounds of the environmental damage or the use of scarce food resources that are associated with animal husbandry. It may be justified on animal-centred grounds, whether the specific cruelties of industrialised farming or the wider intuition that killing and consuming fellow-creatures is wrong. It will also be opposed: on classic grounds of Christian freedom, and, of course, because many people like eating meat.

Beneath these disputes and many others will be the Bible. Throughout this book we have seen that Protestants use the Bible both devotionally and polemically, as lovers and as fighters. Twentieth-century disputes between conservative and modernist theologies have rarely recognised this basic fact. Those two parties disagree bitterly about how and indeed whether to use the Bible polemically, but in practice, their use of it devotionally and as a source of inspiration is shared ground. This dispute will not be resolved, but it will move on.

[3] I. Miller, 'Evangelicalism and the Early Vegetarian Movement in Britain c.1847-1860' in *Journal of Religious History* 35 (2011), 199-210; Samantha Calvert, 'A Taste of Eden: Modern Christianity and Vegetarianism' in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 58 (2007), 461-481. Full disclosure: in 2012 I became pescatarian myself for some of the reasons discussed here.

Twentieth-century textual conservatism, like seventeenth-century Protestant Orthodoxy, was a defensive stance – and a successful one, as the collapse of various liberal and radical Protestantisms during the same period shows. But it has also involved formidable problems, especially where a no-surrender textual absolutism has painted Protestants into scientific or historical claims that look very implausible, or into ethical stances which are painfully counter-cultural. In the coming decades, that hard defensive line will be softened.

The fundamental reason for this is the rise of Pentecostalism, global Protestantism's main engine. Pentecostals will continue joyfully to affirm belief in the Bible as a touchstone of faith. However, their openness to the Holy Spirit's continued promptings gives them a means of sidestepping textual stumbling-blocks while still affirming faith in the Word. Their tradition makes it easier to read the Bible as a love-letter and less necessary to read it as a treatise. The great Pentecostal ecumenist David du Plessis was as loyal to the Bible as anyone could wish, but in a 1986 memoir reflected that 'as Jesus predicted, I can write a Book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit in my lifetime that would eclipse the Acts of the Apostles'.[4] The Bible is the Word of God, but not the last word.

For one example of what is possible, consider the Friday Masowe Church in contemporary Zimbabwe, whose members proudly style themselves 'the Christians who don't read the Bible'. As one of their preachers explained in 1999:

> Here we don't talk of Bibles. What is the Bible to me? Having it is just trouble. Look, why would you read it? It gets old. Look again. After keeping it for some time it falls apart, the pages come out. ... We don't talk Bible-talk here. We have a true Bible here

– and he indicated his heart. In fact, it is clear that the Masowe church's leaders do know their Bibles, and even learned their disdain for the Bible from the Bible. Rather, they believe

[4] Joshua R. Ziefle, *David du Plessis and the Assemblies of God: The Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 105.

that ‘the Bible is the Word of God, but it is not always relevant to the needs of Africans today’. So they look to the Holy Spirit for direct guidance.[5] This is an extreme example, more like Quakerism than normal Pentecostalism, but once you have accepted the possibility that the Holy Spirit can act and speak here and now, this is where it can lead. It is not old-fashioned textual fundamentalism. It is not old-fashioned liberalism either.

The ever-more exuberant variety of Protestantism will itself weaken textual fundamentalism. It is not simply that a cacophany of different interpretations undermines any simple notion of being a ‘Bible-believer’. The Bible itself is becoming increasingly varied: a slow-burning but important development. Most Protestant cultures formed around a single Biblical translation. These texts – the Luther Bible in German, the King James Bible in English, the Union Version in Chinese – came to be venerated, and sometimes treated as inspired texts in their own right, as was also the case with some ancient translations. This made shared Protestant vernacular cultures in those languages possible, and gave believers the immediate contact with the Word which they craved. But it had its drawbacks.

One, ironically, is the sheer quality of those iconic Bibles. The King James Bible is a literary masterpiece, and I have of course used it for the epigraphs throughout this book. But it rendered the whole of the Bible, a Babel of literary styles and voices, into the same sombrely magnificent register, so making it easier to mistake ‘the Bible’ for a single voice. It also masked a feature of the Bible which was immediately apparent to its ancient readers. The Greek of the New Testament is not sombrely magnificent, but blunt, simple marketplace language. Many ancient readers found the claim that this was God’s Word shocking, or laughable. Christians typically replied that it was indeed shocking: as shocking as God choosing to become a human baby. That salutary shock is something which few Protestants have ever been able to feel. The explosion of new Biblical translations, permanently breaking

[5] Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 2-3, 6-7.

the monopolies of those old, iconic versions, has helped to break down Protestantism's unified cultures, for good or ill. It makes it harder for Protestants to know, collectively, what the Bible says. It may also make it easier for them to hear, individually, what the Bible is saying.

Protestants in the world

Protestant growth in China and sub-Sarahan Africa will continue for the time being, although the blistering pace may slow. This will not, however, produce a new rash of 'Protestant countries', like Germany or Britain of old. In some countries, as seems to be the case in South Korea, Protestants will strike a ceiling beyond which it is hard to expand further. More complete dominance is possible in Africa, where there may be more self-proclaimed 'Christian countries' like Zambia. But there as elsewhere, the speed of Protestantism's spread raises the possibility that it may ebb as quickly as it has flowed. It has become proverbial amongst African Christians that African Christianity is a mile wide and an inch deep. It is not at all clear that African Christians deserve such disparaging comments, but certainly the new Christian identities of first- and second-generation converts are not yet settled and stable. Settled stability may not be something which our age has to offer.

Pentecostalism's growth in Latin America is also set to continue, a success with wider significance. This is the first instance in modern times of Protestants converting Catholic populations wholesale, or indeed of any of the world's major religions winning large numbers of converts from another. It raises the question: what else might Pentecostalism achieve? The country to watch is India. Despite enormous effort over several centuries, India's Christian population remains in the region of 2-3%. However, if India achieves the sustained economic growth and urbanisation to which it aspires, the resulting social dislocation could create the

kinds of conditions in which Pentecostalism has thrived a great elsewhere in the world. It is possible that over the coming decades Pentecostalism may make significant inroads, especially if borne by Latin American or even African missionaries. And while Hindu identity is a formidable obstacle, alienation from Hindu nationalism may also provide an opening.

South Asia is also a likely site of conflict with one of Protestantism's two great global competitors: Islam. The two great global religious movements of the past half-century, Pentecostalism and jihadist Islam, are strange twins. Where Pentecostalism has spread almost unnoticed, jihadist Islam has made itself spectacularly visible. How these two movements' very different trajectories will intersect is one of the key questions of the twenty-first century. I hesitate to make any predictions at all, since the answer will depend less on developments within Protestantism than on how the bitter, switchback conflicts within the Islamic world play out. Some factions will triumph, some will be suppressed, some will discredit themselves, but although the rest of the world has a considerable stake in these struggles, it will not have very much influence on them.

Protestantism's competition with Islam will be focused on frontier zones, above all the southern Sahara and central Africa. This is likely to be a bruising and defensive battle, a struggle involving a good deal of actual violence, and also a race for the moral high ground. Here, if anywhere, Protestants will feel the need to hold to textual precision and to austerely traditionalist views of gender and sexual ethics. This struggle will not, however, see many conversions in either direction. Its outcome – which may well be a grim stalemate – will be determined by violence, as Muslim and Christian rivals try to drive each other out of particular territories; and by demographics, as it becomes clear which group is outbreeding the other. It is not a cheerful prospect.

Protestantism will also confront Islam in Europe, but here the decisive factor is the presence of its other great global competitor. Not the historic enemy, Catholicism, whose rivalry with Protestantism continues but has become friendlier and less existentially threatening; but secularism. Secularism has made all the running in Europe in the past half-century, and which has also proved formidable in North America. Europe and America's white Christians have not quite accepted yet that their old cultural dominance is gone, even though many of them now disown that dominance and its historical baggage. Nor have European and American secularists quite accepted yet that they will not sweep all before them. What has complicated this long-running drama is jihadist Islam. Islamist rhetoric labels the western democracies as 'Christian' or indeed as 'Crusaders', and some right-wing elements in both Europe and America have embraced this notion of a clash of cultures between Christian and Muslim. For others, especially in Europe, the sensible desire to avoid any notion of a war against Islam has meant confronting jihadism through a wider scepticism about religion of any kind in public life. How Europe's historic religions will negotiate this minefield remains to be seen, but the terrain is not easy.

If European Protestantism has a future, it will likely be newly built, rather than a matter of reviving historical denominational establishments.[6] There are two reasons to suspect this may happen. One is immigration: Europe's combination of wealth, proximity to poor and conflict-prone regions, and sharp demographic down-turn mean that, one way or another, its flow of immigrants is unlikely to slow. In particular, African Christianity's presence in Europe will only increase.

European and American politics may contribute, too. The western democracies have been undergoing a slow crisis of legitimacy, in which growing minorities of voters have become disenchanted with their political systems and with the centrist technocracies they

[6] Such as my own, the Church of England. As I said, this is not about what I *want* to happen.

tend to produce. This often manifests as anger with 'politicians' as a class, and as a conclusion that politics is inherently corrupt. It can either bolster unconventional politicians who promise to change the entire political culture, or it can foster disgusted withdrawal from political life. These are alarming conditions, but they are similar to those in which Pentecostalism has thrived elsewhere in the world. Communities which affirm disdain for the corruption of public life, and which offer spiritual rather than political power, may find that their message resonates. It is even possible that, on the model of anti-corruption political parties across the world, a new Pentecostal politics may emerge in parts of Europe, committed less to a particular policy agenda than to changing the political culture with a new moralism. Such commitments are much easier to make than to keep, and can mask grave dangers. It is not at all clear that a development like this would be good for the western democracies, nor even that it would bolster Protestantism, except in the short term. It does, however, seem likely that the western democracies' moribund and transactional political culture will find a new moral compass at some point. In which case, there are many worse options available.

As Protestants and Protestantism continue to play their parts in these and other dramas over the decades ahead, it will be important to remember what Protestantism is. It is an identity, indeed a whole family of squabbling identities, which people define themselves by, hold to, fight for, and sometimes abandon. It is also a family of cultures and practices, which set the patterns of individuals' and communities' lives. It is also a set of institutions with a persistent presence across a wide range of human societies. It is also a varied set of doctrines and ideas which fundamentally condition how Protestants understand the world and themselves, even if the doctrines they believe are rarely quite the same as the doctrines their churches teach. But before it is any of these things, and underpinning them all, it is that old love-affair: a direct encounter with God's power, whether as a lived experience, a memory or

a hope. That is not what it is for every Protestant, of course, but without that underpinning, the identities, cultures, institutions and doctrines would all collapse. That heartbeat, however muffled, is beneath it all. It is through that promise to change lives that Protestantism has changed the world.